

**Babeş-Bolyai University
Sociology Doctoral School**

Politics and Television

**Final Televised Presidential
Debates in Romania**

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January 2015

Cluj-Napoca

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Key words: Presidential elections, campaign, candidates, debate, media, politics, television, turning points, campaign topics, visual approach, shots, set.

Introduction

This thesis is based on theoretical aspects and uses methodologies from several different fields and thus constitutes an ample interdisciplinary effort.

The thesis follows the evolution of TV coverage of presidential campaigns, concentrating on live televised final debates between the candidates in the second round. The 2009 and 2014 final debates were given special importance and a greater space in the thesis because of their major impact as well as their special particularities. The 2009 debate between Traian Basescu and Mircea Geoana was the only one that was seriously and professionally treated in terms of visuals, from the proper setting that suited the importance of the moment, to the creation of good visual moments, such as entering The Palace of Parliament, swearing on the Bible or mutually gift offering. Also the camera work, directing and lighting were professional and appropriated. The 2014 debate, also not much better than the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate in terms of visuals, brought the greatest surprise in the history of presidential elections in Romania, as well as the most intense controversies.

These final debates (except for 2000 when it did not take place, as Ion Iliescu refused to face Corneliu Vadim Tudor), had a major influence, along with well chosen moves or historic blunders, on the outcome of the presidential elections in Romania.

The first televised presidential debate ever, between Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy in November 1960 has changed the public perception of the candidates for ever, often bringing image before message.

This thesis analyzes and then compares 25 years of politics and television in Romania, trying to understand how they influenced each other, how they informed or manipulated us, how they evolved along with technology and persuasive techniques, from the first democratic elections in 1990 until Klaus Iohannis's success in 2014.

The fundamental right to elect, conscientizing on the power that the citizen has, combined with the need for spectacle, is the essence of this thesis, focusing on the televised presidential campaigns, the only mediatic event that equals the ratings of important ball games or major talent shows. In the long run, television turns presidential elections into a talent show, with all its elements: Settings, story, suspense, show, characters, surprise moves and, more than the multi-million shows, a big and real stake for the viewer.

Media Sociology cannot be independent from a representation of society. It offers the tools to help understanding of the role that media plays in everyday life and provides keys of interpretation that let us use the means of communication better, as their number has rapidly increased during past decades.

Many of the decisions taken by political leaders are today tributary to the way media will comment on them. Relation between media and politics is, undoubtedly, an important factor in understanding the stakes of contemporary democracy.

I. Mass Media and politics

The mere existence of society is determined by the exchange of information. The informational component occupies a central position in the social system, crucial for the entire functioning of the system. Information ensures rational management of human activities and adapting means and resources to the aims of society.

The first chapter presents the relationship between media and society. This can be defined by a set of concepts: *functions, roles and effects*, concepts presented in detail in this chapter.

The analysis of the system which produces press items can be performed on three levels:

- *individual* (behind any media product there is the work of an individual),
- *organisational* (the work of the individual cannot be perceived outside a team) and
- *institutional* (the product reflects the economic and social system in which media works).

In support of these we will introduce a series of terms, presented as follows:

„Gatekeeping” was introduced by Lewin, to define the codes by which people allow or block the access of specific information into a system.

Studies referring to *gatekeeping, social control* and *selection processes* are relevant for the sociologic research of journalism, stressing the influence of some external factors on the mental frame of the journalist. The *gatekeeper* model has some limitations, as it concentrates almost exclusively on the selection of information rather than on processing the information.

Framing is a concept complementary to gatekeeping. The *Frame* is a cognitive structure that is used by journalists as an interpretation and information selection pattern. Goffman (1974) considers that by means of these interpretation patterns, individuals localise, perceive, identify, classify and organize later experiences, in order to assign them a meaning. Journalists act just the same, using frames to recognise relevant information and sort them by cognitive categories, offering them in a friendly form to the public.

Agenda setting describes a phenomenon present mostly in campaigns, referring to the capacity of media to amplify the relevance of an event by repeatedly delivering news about that event.

The agenda theory allows the understanding of two phenomenons specific to press: The first refers to the fact that, when media presents intensively and generalised a series of events, public will consider those events as being important, because they credit journalists with competence and responsibility. The second phenomenon refers to the competitory mechanisms that determin journalists to pay more attention to what happens in other media institutions than in the environment, consequently buying any subject that has a potential for success, in a form of *pack journalism*.

The concept of *spyral of silence*, developed and tested by Noelle-Neumann (1991), says that, in order to avoid isolation in important public debates, many people tend to hide their oppinions if they feel they are in minority and vice-versa. The outcome is that those oppinions which are perceived as dominant gain more ground, whilst the others shrink even more, in a *spyral effect*.

Media content is the most intensely debated element of the triad broadcaster – message – receiver, both by specialists (sociologists, media analysts, linguists, a.s.o.) and the public for the simple reason of being the most accessible and visible of all. Media message research is of both qualitative and quantitative nature, most of the times a combination of the two methods.

Mass media can be considered as the sum of the materials by which we can *define* and *construct reality*, the prerequisite for this affirmation is that reality is being constructed by means of interrogation, evaluation, acceptance and rejection.

If common people interpret reality and facts around them by means of frames, determined by e certain type of structuring experience, media itself operates a *reframing*, that is applying its own standards to the primary frames of social actors. These secondary frames are, in fact, a mediatic translation of everyday experiences. Each media organisation apply their own reframings that illustrate their editorial logic and choices concerning the areas of reality about they wish to speak, as well as the type of approach, thus providing guidelines for the discursive identity of the means of communication and its place in the social environment.

Spectacularisation of information must keep the apparent objectivity and, in the same time, to capture or even seduce the spectator. Thus, the focus is always on the content of the speech, rather than the situation in whitch it was produced, to build an impersonal speech. Objectivity requires factual reporting, and in order to be credible, mediatic information must comply to a representation that is common to public and press, advantaging descriptive and narrative information as opposed to explanatory, rationally exposed information.

Mediatic speech does not stand alone, it is fueled by the political and social speech, with an interrelation between them.

II. Political Communication and Television

Relying more and more on the apparent impact of picture, politicians started to be overpreoccupied by their televised appearance. Media changes the traditional rules of democracy. Most recent research try to separate the effects of mediatisation, focusing on the dominant media: television. Its power over leaders can be expressed on three levels: Appearance, work and recruitment.

Success and efficiency of a televised address depends of how pertinent it is, meaning how it can formulate a new statement in new terms, and how pregnant it is, meaning how well it confronts other statements of the same nature: it is then imperative not to abuse. Since our perception over a politician is influenced by television, it seems that the latter is able to reshape the identity of great leaders, as well as of political parties with an interest in developing a clear, easy to understand speech.

Personal image of the candidate and the global image of the party, more than just adding reasonable arguments, determine the electors' perception, especially the undecided, over politics. It must also be considered the appearance provided by satyre shows, which especially attract younger audiences.

Mass media, mostly television, also have an influence on politicians' work and daily agenda. The question of time was also subjected to profound changes. While political time needs analysis and deliberation, mediatic time is, on the contrary, a time of live communication, ephemeral and swift. Relying on exit polls, Romanian television stations acted this way in 2009, when they announced the victory of Mircea Geoana, or in 2014, when according to the interests of the TV stations, only announced the polls that suited them, until the last moment. These contradictory reports prove that television did not allow time to check exit polls, since each one of them wanted to be first. Subjected to the pressure of urgency, politicians are often forced to react to journalists' requests, to intervene on various media on the same topic to look for the mediatic effect or cliché, with the inherent risks implied by this kind of practice: the risk of excessive simplification from lack of objectivity, of ill calculated dramatisation, even of superficiality and conformism. Politicians' activity is more and more subjected to a permanent supervision by media and public. Universal vote remains, of course, the main tool of politicians' legitimacy. They are though forced to work hard to explain all year round, to report to media, to answer questions based on polls.

Finally, change regards recruiting political personnel. Oratorical talent in rallies is no longer sufficient. It must be completed by visibility and media performance. Legitimity is obtained by a good media performance and a popularity often gained in activities such as sports or business. In many cases, public opinion stands as selection standard

III. Politics and Television in Romania

In a society in which politics and business are affected by wide spread corruption, independent media channels can hardly survive, being forced to compromise a lot in

order to stay in business. No private TV is getting any profit(except for Antena 3), acting on a market with low advertising income in a non stable social and economic system. Investors fear abrupt state policy changes. Legislative and regulatory systems, for instance, can anytime be subjected to political influence. All these factors increase the general level of business risk. A major problem remains the lack of transparency regarding TV stations ownership. Often enough, the origin of funding television activities can only be traced by following foreign investors' accounts. There are serious suspicions that real stake holders are covered under figurative identities, mentioned in offshore companies. Lack of ownership transparency can be dangerous. Firstly, because it can cover political or business connections. Secondly, because without real information on ownership, there is no way of controlling ownership concentration, despite clear and strict legal provisions.

Pressure from advertising income has also a negative effect on editorial independence. In addition, state supported publicity is another tool for increasing dependancy of media to political and economic interests.

Building a solid democratic society in Romania should start in the media sector. Television stations should harden their efforts to become more transparent and credible by establishing an objective and profound journalism on the screen. Though hard to achieve, this objective is the only tool to turn media into the watch dog of the society, as it should be in a real democracy.

IV. The Televised Debates of Presidential Campaigns

The first televised presidential debate in history took place in 1960, between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon (Fig.1).



Fig.1

Now it's a commonly acknowledged fact that without this debate 54 years ago, Kennedy would not had become president. Beside bringing Kennedy to the White House, this 60 minutes debate between a young, handsome senator of Irish origins and the Vice-President in office, fundamentally and permanently changed campaigning, television environment and, finally, politics. "It is one of those moments in history when you can

say things have changed dramatically – in this case, over night" says Alan Schroeder, media historian and professor at Northeastern University, author of the book *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV*. Beyond what this debate meant for politics by bringing Kennedy to presidency, Sorensen considers that television fundamentally changed the world. In 1962, president Kennedy spectacularly refused to comply with the recommendation from The Pentagon to give a military response to the Soviet threat in the Cuban missile crisis. Sorensen is sure that Nixon would have authorised the military response, being much more impulsive. There would have been a nuclear war which no one survived."I think we must be grateful to television for John F. Kennedy winning that debate," said Sorensen.

The model of political communication “marketing” brought numerous changes in politicians’ behaviour and their relation with media. Today they use persuasive techniques which can be reduced to four aspects:

- personalising interventions
- theatralising behaviour
- using a new rhetoric
- interpreting opinion polls

V. Presidential Elections in Romania

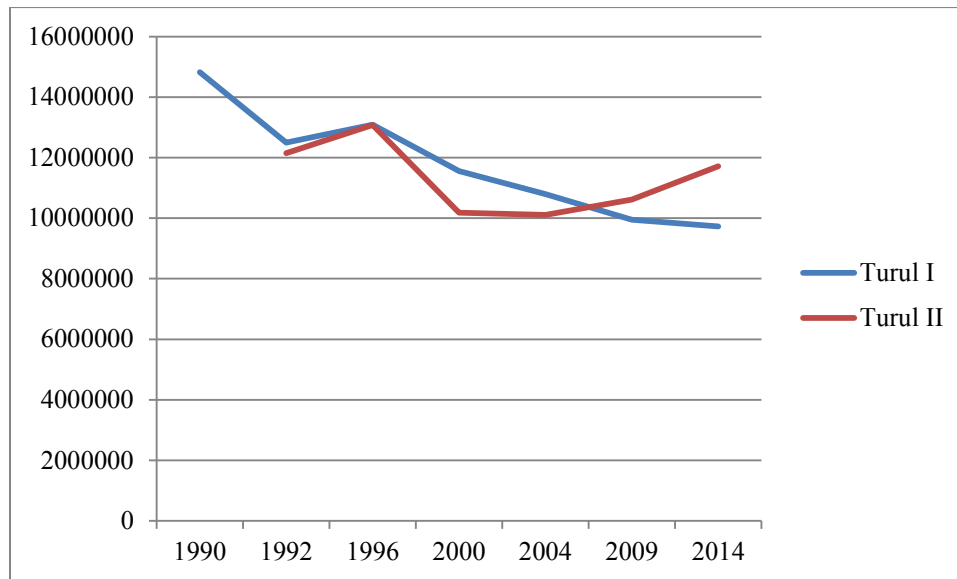
For starters, here are the constitutional provisions regarding the election of the president of Romania:

- (1) The president of Romania is elected by universal vote, equal, direct, secret and freely expressed.
- (2) It is declared elected the candidate who wins, in the first round, the majority of votes by electors registered on electoral lists.
- (3) In case none of the candidates wins this majority, a second round will be organized, between the first two candidates in order of the number of votes won in the first round. The candidate who wins the greater number of votes is declared elected.
- (4) No person can hold the office as president of Romania for more than two terms. These can be successive.

Imposing these rules to all seven editions of the presidential scrutiny generated a certain uniformity of the electoral practice, but applying them in different political contexts made each scrutiny unique in its way.

Participation in elections. There was a general tendency of decrease from the huge 86,19% in 1990 to the moderate, yet majority of 53,17% in 2014. The tendency is not rigorously constant if we look at the absolute figures, in 1996 voting roughly 600.000 more people than in 1992. Then, the tendency of absenteeism increase is also valid for the second round, except for 2009 and 2014, which brought the second victory of Traian Băsescu, at a difference of less than 1%,, respectively the victory of Klaus Iohannis, defeating Victor Ponta by a sensible difference of 9%. Except for the scrutinies in 2009

and 2014 (when participation in the second round was almost 11% higher than the first round), participation in the second round was lower than the first round. An important difference of about 8% was also recorded in 2000, when candidates were Ion Iliescu and Corneliu Vadim Turdor. There is a noticeable decrease of the interest for the election of the president, in time, according to the tendency of increasing absenteeism after 1989. Dynamics of vote participation is graphically depicted below.¹



Scrutiny Participants

The presidential winning majority also decreased, in 2014 being almost 2,5 times less than in 1990. The election of the president was made with an absolute majority only in 1990. Every other time, the president got elected with a plurality of votes. This situation is specific to the contemporary representative democracy, the major concern of which being to ensure the conditions that government is decided by the majority.

Candidates. Regarding candidates, the tendency was different from participation in the scrutiny. In 1990 there were three candidates, in 1992 there were six, in 1996 sixteen, in 2000, 2004 and 2009 there were twelve and in 2014 there were fourteen. The number of political parties that had candidates evolved from three in 1990 to five in 1992, thirteen in 1996, nine in 2000, eleven in 2004, twelve in 2009 and ten in 2014. No presidential election was won by an independent candidate. Candidates who made it to the second round (in 1990 there was no second round, Ion Iliescu winning the first round by 85% of the votes) were all representative for the respective political moment.

In conclusion, presidential elections in Romania, majority type scrutiny, are the result of the following characteristics:

¹ realizat pe baza datelor disponibile la http://www.bec2014.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/SIAP2014_PAR_Raport-Situatie-Prezenta-la-urne.pdf

- decreasing popular participation and winning with a plurality of votes;
- numerous candidates, both partisan and independent, with a distribution obeying the rules of dominant party multipartism;
- maintaining a decisive influence of presidential elections over parliamentary elections (governmental majority, respectively), in spite the separation of the two electoral processes; scrutiny in two rounds (except for 1990), the first round simultaneous with the parliamentary elections (until 2004).

VI. Final TV Presidential Debates after 1989

This chapter analyzes the evolution of final presidential debates from 1990 to 2014.

The presidential elections in 1990 present only three candidates, very different from each other: Ion Iliescu (FSN), Ion Rațiu (PNT-CD) and Radu Câmpeanu(PNL). The first post-communist televised presidential debate was marked by Ion Ratiu's vision on democracy: "I shall struggle to my last drop of blood for your right to disagree with me." In 1996 the final battle was fought by Ion Iliescu and Emil Constantinescu. For the former, the televised debate turned into a handicap. Answering Emil Constantinescu's question : „Do you believe in God, mr. Iliescu?" Ion Iliescu avoided a straightforward answer, explaining a lot but expressing very little. In 2004 Traian Băsescu triumphed in the final debate over Adrian Năstase. Traian Băsescu referred to Romanians' curse of having to choose between two ex-communists. The 2009 debate between Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu was decisive for the PSD candidate's failure. The decisive topic: Mircea Geoană's nightly visit to Sorin Ovidiu Vântu's place. In 2014 there were two live debates, on Realitatea TV and B1 TV, for which the campaign staffs had agreed upon.

Research Methodology

Aim of research. The present research tracks the way final presidential debates in post communist Romania were set up and conducted. Beyond visual approach, format and specific of each debate, we investigated how these media events have evolved in the quarter century that passed since the first democratic elections in 1990.

Data gathering. The analysis was made on video recordings of final presidential debates in 1990, 1992, 1996, 2004, 2009 and 2014. In 2000 there was no debate before the second round, as Ion Iliescu refused to confront Corneliu Vadim Tudor, his opponent. For the elections of 1990, 1992, 1996 and 2004 recordings available in archives were studied. For 2009 and 2014, the author personally recorded the debates.

Methods and tools In order to identify the format and specificity of each debate, the author used visual analysis and semiotic analysis.

Video analysis followed a series of structural features, such as:

- Rhythm
- Edit
- Narrative structure

Content elements consisting mainly in emotional tension were also taken into account.

Alternating verbal and visual content was studied in detail in order to identify the means by which TV producers took advantage of the visual opportunities of the televisual environment. Camera and edit techniques were described in detail:

- Camera angles (high, low)
- Camera movements (dropped, upward)
- Shot selection (close-up, long shot, a.s.o. etc.)
- Visual wrap of the event (how it is constructed, what frames and procedures were used)

In order to achieve the semiotic analysis, semiotic conventions configured by Berger (1991) were used.

<i>Signifier (shot)</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Signified (Meaning)</i>
Close-up	Just the face(or bust) of the subject in shot	Intimacy
Medium shot	Most of the body in shot	Personal Relationship
Knee shot	Part of set and subjects in shot	Context
Long shot	Person/persons entirely in shot	Social relationship

The development of debate approach was determined by the evolution of society itself, by the level of information and education of the audience, by the evolution of television industry and even by the evolution of visual technology. Evolution is obvious at the level of formats, sets, graphics, hosts, visual approach, each of these elements proving to be better or worse depending of a number of various factors.

Starting with 1996, private TV steps into the relationship politics-television, so that in 2014 campaigns are carried out almost entirely on news channels, This brings the debate on the ground of talk show professionals, while disconsidering the visual message for the sake of a swift transmission of the verbal message at low costs.

Visual approach. the first presidential debate in Romania occurred exactly 30 years after the first debate on TV ever (Nixon-Kennedy 1960) but it proved to be slower and clumsier than that. The candidates were seated in big armchairs: Radu Câmpeanu (PNL), Ion Iliescu (FSN) and Ion Rațiu (PNT), facing the three hosts: Răzvan Theodorescu, Emanuel Valeriu and Victor Ionescu.



Fig.2

The circular set had been built in a huge production facility of the Romanian Television. Behind the candidates the national colours were projected by coloured lights on a white canvas background. (Fig.2) Candidates sat on massive armchairs beside chest tall tables which almost obscured them. On these tables there were big green water bottles and glasses, much too present in medium shots of the candidates. Candidates were separated by palmtrees, that were always present in TVR sets at the time.

Candidates' armchairs were placed on a circular podium about 50 cm. High, covered with a scarlet carpet, probably trying to send out the idea of a tribune. The set has a strong communist look, suggesting an interrogation rather than a free debate.(Fig.22).



Fig.3

Candidates were shot in long, almost extreme long shots (all three, Fig.3) and individual medium shots (Fig.4, 5, 6).



Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6

The three hosts were also seated on heavy armchairs, behind a massive semi-ring shaped table, on which there were microphones and trays with water bottles and glasses. Hosts were always shown in group shots, probably because of the insufficient number of cameras in the studio.(Fig.7)



Fig.7

The 1996 final debate was the first broadcasted by a private station, Antena 1, as a proof of the important gain of audience driven away from TVR. The debate was organized by Antena 1, Libertatea and Jurnalul Național.

Transmission started with the opponents walking smiling on a hallway and then posing for the press cameras (Fig.8 - 10).



Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10

It was the first time when the public entered the backstage of the debate. From now on, the public will see and enjoy the moments that precede the “real” debate, preparing for the final alongside with the candidates, increasing the tension and getting a feeling of participating to the debate, of “being there”.

The Băsescu-Geoană debate of 2009 started in a much improved version. Candidates Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu arrived at the Palace of Parliament. The building itself imposes a much stronger impression than the cramped studio of Antena 1 in Băneasa, Bucharest. The setup matches a grand spectacle. Candidates enter accompanied by admirers and supporters.(Fig.11,12)



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13

Traian Băsescu is rather restrained, surrounded by family and close collaborators. Mircea Geoană comes in an almost triumphant march at the arm of his wife, followed by party leaders, while the crowd of supporters cry in rhythm „Freedom, Freedom!”. (Fig.13). Mircea Geoană enters the hall with his wife, followed closely by Crin Antonescu, Klaus Iohannis, Liviu Dragnea and Victor Ponta. Mircea Geoană and Traian Băsescu meet halfway, they greet and shake hands, then greet the opponents’ staff.(Fig.14,15)



Fig.14



Fig.15

Each candidate is accompanied by roughly 50 supporters, seated in two distinct areas, forming a rectangle behind their candidate’s desk. Among Geoană’s supporters stand out Victor Ponta, Klaus Iohannis, Cozmin Gușă, Mircea Dinescu, Viorel Hrebenciuc, Ioan Rus, Ilie Năstase, Mircea Diaconu, Dorel Vișan, acad. Eugen Simion, Radu Mazăre, Mihai Leu, Mircea Ionescu Quintus, Dan Nica.

In Traian Băsescu’s team there are, among others, Maria. Elena and Ioana Băsescu, Emil Boc, Monica Macovei, Vasile Blaga, Gheorghe Flutur, Petre Miluț, Cristian Boureanu, Daniel Funeriu, Ioan Crăciunescu, Neculai Onțanu. Obviously, cameras are hunting for celebrities.

It is remarkable how televisions saw the importance of the groups of supporters, which add to the legitimacy of the candidates by their own value. In 1996, each candidate was accompanied by four supporters (even though they agreed on three), crammed in a corner, lacking space or proper lighting. Ion Iliescu came with Teodor Meleșcanu, Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Corina Crețu and Paul Dobrescu(Fig.16). Emil Constantinescu was accompanied by Zoe Petre, Mona Muscă, Ion Caramitru and Cătălin Harnagea(Fig.17).



Fig.16



Fig.17

Băsescu and Geoană are then prepared for the debate, they have their microphones put on in sight, cameras insist on these technical details, suggesting that nothing will be hidden. The TV technicians are elegantly dressed, in tie and jacket in the grave but open note of the entire atmosphere. (Fig.18)



Fig.18



Fig.19

There is a major improvement from the debate of 1996, when Antena 1 attempted a similar effect with considerably less performant equipment. (Fig.20) The set was placed in studio A of Antena 1. Small, simple organized, the set had about 10 by 7 meters. The studio only had four video cameras. The background consists in a blue canvas with two

tricolour strips. In the background there are also four rectangles covered in canvas half purple and half blue. Candidates accompanied by the host, journalist Octavian Andronic, enter the studio and prepare for the confrontation (Fig.21).



Fig.20



Fig.21

The advantage of the set in the Palace of Parliament is overwhelming. Except for some lights, the set is the hall itself. There is a huge elegant carpet on the floor. Candidates' desks are placed very close to each other, as requested by the organizer – The Institute for Public Policies. Host Robert Turcescu appreciated that the debate will have a ping-pong feeling with short, lively answers and dialogues. The dimension of the hall allowed for two cranes to be installed, so crane shots will be intensively used (Fig.22, 23), capturing the emotion of the moment, alternating with close-up shots from mobile cameras, dynamically directing well chosen shots, creating an interesting view for the audience. Supporting personalities are rendered high importance, being very present in the shots, consisting the very background for the candidates.



Fig.22



Fig.23

Here is the evolution of placing candidates on the set and relationship with the moderator: 1990 TVR(Fig.24), 1996 Antena 1(Fig.25), 2004 TVR (Fig.26), 2009 Realitatea TV (Fig.27), 2014 Realitatea TV(Fig.28), 2014 B1TV (Fig. 29)



Fig.24



Fig.25



Fig.26



Fig.27



Fig.28



Fig.29

When candidates were in dialogue, the medium shot split screen technique has always been used starting from 1996, as follows:1996 Antena 1(Fig.30), 2004 TVR (Fig.31), 2009 Realitatea TV (Fig.32), 2014 Realitatea TV(Fig.33), 2014 B1TV (Fig. 34)



Fig.30



Fig.31



Fig.32



Fig.33



Fig.34

Thus, from a visual standpoint, the only final debate which was really and thoroughly prepared, which succeeded in depicting the grandeur of the moment was the 2009 debate. The Palace of Parliament proved to be an inspired choice, allowing for a set according to the message, using wide crane shots alternating with tight shots, even close-up reaction

shots of supporters. This was made possible by placing the groups of supporters in sight, turning supporters into characters of the show, using them as visual support for the topics in debate (family, economy, government, anti-corruption) thus obtaining a very good dynamic of directing. Some visual special moments were prepared, such as mutual gifts and swearing on the Bible, which were meant to freshen up the interest of the viewer. Obviously, this was achieved with the contribution of a professional production team.

The other debates were visually treated as common talk shows, thus failing to create a special feeling in the audience, in accordance with the importance of the political moment. The performance of news channels in 2014, limited by their own studios and equipment reduced the visual impact, turning the debates into video radio, with lot of camera mistakes. In other words, with one exception (2009), the power of visuals was underestimated, if not ignored.

Debates format. The format of a live televised debate must be extremely well planned, considering the unpredictability of live TV, the difficulty of meeting the time frames and neverending replicas of the candidates. In the absence of a competent and experienced moderator, the show will surely turn into chaos, as it happened in many of the debates. Some did not even have a clear format, the debate going on randomly. Generally their format was derived from a classic talk show format, with only a few slight adjustments. We can easily see format and visual similitudes between the Nixon-Kennedy debate of 1960 and the debates set up by Romanian news channels in 2014.

The first post communist debate on the 17th of May 1990 did not have a clear format. The debate was extremely slow, candidates and moderators being extremely condescending with each other. Moderators only intervened to give the floor to a candidate or another. The debate treated generalities and principles, which was understandable if we consider that Romanian society was taking the first steps into democracy. During the campaign, Ion Rațiu addressed the crowds : “When you vote on the 20th of May, vote for democracy, so Romania joins the path of Western civilisation once again!”

In the opening of the 1996 debate, Alessandra Stoicescu, in a voice over comment, said: „For one hour, together with Mr. Octavian Andronic, they will discuss and debate problems and proposals to save Romania from the crisis in which it is today.”

The moderator does not announce the program, only that he is going to skip the candidates' bios. The one hour debate lasted for 90 minutes. In the end, the moderator announced that a lot of topics were not discussed. Timing was completely ignored, so two minute answers came to last three times as much. The moderator simply lost control of the debate.

The only debate that stucked to the format agreed upon with the staffs of the candidates was the 2009 debate, largely due to the experience and determination of Robert Turcescu, who took care to compensate time frames.

The 2014 campaign comes with two unprepared debates, without a previously prepared format, and the outcome was far from what we could call professionalism.

The Realitatea TV debate, only confirmed a few hours before, did not practically have a format, as Klaus Iohannis remarked: “Except for the generic invitation to a 90 minute debate, I was not given any details. I presume you have a plan, I don’t know how much we will speak.” Under these circumstances, the show turned into a neverending array of mutual offenses.

Slightly better organized (and conducted), the B1TV debate failed to bring up any other topics than justice, which allowed candidates to attack each other on the topic of their corrupt supporters.

Generally, all debates included statements in which candidates should motivate their candidacy (with the 2009 version – Why wouldn’t you vote for your opponent?), debates on topics, mutual questions, final statements and, by case, questions from journalists or surprise moments (2009).

In conclusion, the format of a debate must be a clear and feasible one, completing the aim of the debate. If the aim is to objectively inform the citizen about the candidates’ programs and persons, then the format should be attractive and dynamic in order to maintain the attention of the viewer to the end. It must be clearly defined, to comprise all the elements that were agreed upon with the campaign staffs and efficiently run through each and all of them. Keeping the viewers alert in order to get them informed is the business of television professionals, not the candidates’ or their staffs’. This is where all the opportunities provided by visuals come into action, the importance of which seems to be underestimated by news TV stations.

Moderators. The evolution of moderating electoral debates follows the pattern of evolution of Romanian politics, television and society. In 1990 in the Romanian Television studio three candidates faced three moderators (Răzvan Theodorescu, Emanuel Valeriu and Victor Ionescu) , seated on heavy armchairs, behind a semi-round table, the set has a communist touch, understandable for a society and television abruptly liberated from communism a few months earlier. (Fig.35). The rhythm is very slow, the three moderators simply give the floor to candidates, with a shyness also originating in the reflexes of the old communist regime.



Fig.35

The first debate on a commercial station (Antena 1 in 1996) was moderated by Octavian Andronic, journalist since 1969, famed cartoonist, founder of Libertatea newspaper on the 22nd of December 1989. In the shot there is a mug with a drawing that belonged to Mr. Andronic himself. Visibly nervous, he is unhappy about not being able to read the teleprompter, he apologizes to the viewers and starts reading from papers. (Fig.36).



Fig.36

Even though it is a commercial station, the old habits of communist press surface from the opening commentary: “Tonight’s meeting can be considered, and I asked the candidates for their permission to do so, rightfully a crowning of this effort to offer you, tele-electors, the picture of a political offer as complete and convincing as possible. The presence of Mr. Iliescu and Mr. Constantinescu face to face, in front of the cameras, constituted one of the most fervent requests of the electorate and it is the chance of Antena 1 to host it and also your chance, esteemed viewers, to witness the debut of a dialogue that we wish to be as serious, argued and sincere as possible, in full concordance with the reputation and political professionalism of those of which you are expected to elect, in a few days’ time, the one who will be the president of Romania in year 2000.”

The moderator completely lost control, especially from the standpoint of timing. The moderator announced that the debate will last for one hour. He skips bios to begin debating. He starts with four common questions from the Constitution, making the debate look like a job interview. Candidates are given two minutes for the answer and one minute for the replica. Answering order alternates, established by drawing lots from a bowl on the table.(Fig. 37) The same procedure will be used to solve similar situations during the following debates by both Robert Turcescu at Realitatea TV in 2009(Fig. 38) and Mădălina Pușcalău at B1 TV after 18 years in 2014.(Fig.39)



Fig.37



Fig.38



Fig.39

The nervous moderator had moments when he feverishly looked for his papers, creating awkward moments. On such an occasion, Emil Constantinescu intervened: „Until you find your papers, I wish good luck to Mr. Iliescu. It is up to us to carry on a serious discussion at the end of which to understand that there is a responsibility. Common success is more important than individual success and it depends on us.”

Octavian Andronic: „I’d be delighted if you didn’t need me anymore, but let’s try and respect the program a little, because we’ll never finish if we go from replica to replica”. The show was supposed to last for an hour now reached 90 minutes. The moderator apologizes inviting the candidates „to finish in an optimistic tone”.

The best moderation was achieved by Robert Turcescu in 2009 (Fig.40). He managed to stay in control of a complex TV show, in a set professionally arranged in the Palace of Parliament, managing to impose the rules of debate, to stop candidates when they ran out of time. He also managed to bring into debate each and every topic in the plan. He had to manage the most difficult moments in the history of Romanian presidential debates, with the most temperamental candidates, with strong personalities, trained for combat.



Fig. 40

2014 brings two debates prepared on the run, in the last moment, with less experienced moderators, in the usual sets of news television stations. The debate on B1TV was moderated by Mădălina Pușcalău(Fig.41), TV journalist who worked at the old B1TV as well as at Realitatea TV and Antena 3. She managed a balanced moderation, keeping the

discussion in a decent tone, although she wasn't able to cover all topics. At the end, both candidates appreciated the way she conducted the debate. Nevertheless, when the candidates became uncontrollable, Mădălina Puşcalău firmly intervened: "Gentlemen, I will have to cut your microphones".



Fig.41



Fig.42

The debate on Realitatea TV was moderated by Rareş Bogdan(Fig.42), journalist, editorial director and then executive director at Realitatea TV.

In order to make the show more dynamic or, probably, to compensate for the scarce preparation due to the insufficient time, the moderator appealed to no less than four fellow journalists from Realitatea TV to ask questions from a nearby studio: Andra Miron, Denise Rifai, Emma Zeicescu(Fig.43,44,45) and Lavinia Şandru.



Fig.43



Fig.44



Fig.45

The group of moderators failed to impose a decent and orderly flow of the show, marked, from start to end by offenses and unfair blows. The impartiality of the moderators was questioned several times. At one point, Rareş Bogdan invited Victor Ponta to stay on the show after the debate was over, offer declined by Victor Ponta himself after his opponent protested.

In conclusion, moderation of Romanian presidential debates have never considered previous experiences constructively, all moderators tried to impose their own model, guided only by their own experience, ignoring precious lessons learned by previous debates moderators and ignoring the far richer experience of Western television. A

moderator can get the most out of an apparently uninteresting debate, or he can literally bury a very good debate format.

Turning Points. There are a few historic moments in the Romanian presidential debates which are generally considered responsible for the outcome of the elections. Sociologists use to call such a moment a „silver bullet”.

1996 – Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?

The first such moment was recorded in 1996, when opponents had to ask each other a question. Then, Emil Constantinescu asked the theatrically timed, prepared question: “Do you believe in God, Mr. Iliescu?” (Fig.46) Ion Iliescu answered: “Men of the cloth themselves evolve in touch with science. Intolerance is of no benefit to anybody. Believe and do not investigate, for instance, is a concept left aside by the clergy as well.”



Fig. 46

2004 –Two ex-communists

The final debate in 2004 brings along a well planned moment, a political move won by Traian Băsescu by Adrian Năstase’s lack of reaction. That silver bullet is remembered as “two ex-communists”(Fig. 47):



Fig.47

Băsescu – „I was talking to my staff at the beginning of the campaign: What a curse on this people to be finally having to choose between two ex-communists: Adrian Năstase

and Traian Băsescu.” On December 10th 2004, the 7 PM exit poll showed a perfect equality of votes. Traian Băsescu then says another historic line, live on all Romanian televisions: „At 9 PM I will lead by 52 to 48 . Adrian, you don't imagine how small you are becoming!”

2009 –Mircea Geoană’s nightly visit at Sorin Ovidiu Vântu’s place. The moment of maximum tension of the 2009 debate, probably of all presidential debates in Romania was, undoubtedly, the moment of mutual questions. This is the „silver bullet” moment that made Traian Băsescu President for a second term, on December 3rd 2009, at 8.33 PM.

Băsescu – A question from a former debate which included Crin Antonescu referred to the fact that I was not able to get in touch with you, then I learned that you couldn't answer the phone, as you were visiting Mr. Vântu at the time. You said you have never visited Mr. Vântu and so on. A few days later Mr. Vântu declared on his own TV station that he invited you several times in the Danube Delta. I am now expecting your apologies for lying in a presidential debate. Don't apologize to me, but to the Romanian people.

Geoană – I don't like Mr. Vântu as it seems you don't like him any more.

Băsescu – **You didn't like him last night as well?** (Fig.48)



Fig. 48

From this moment on, Geoană was lost and Băsescu launched himself on a furious attack, forcing his opponent to admit he had visited Sorin Ovidiu Vântu the night before. Geoană tries lame counter-attacks, so this is how this fight ends:

Băsescu – He calls you and you comply. I come to the conclusion that...

Geoană – I come to the conclusion that you are desperate in this campaign.

Băsescu – **No. Relax. It is not me who is desperate.**

2014 -...between real men, let's reject the Law of amnesty and pardon.

On a smaller scale though, the 2014 debate has its silver bullet. Klaus Iohannis provoked Victor Ponta, "as between real men", to urgently summon Parliament in order to reject the Law of amnesty and pardon: "Mr. Ponta, between real men, let us summon the

Parliament tomorrow and close this shameful chapter of the Law of amnesty and pardon once and for all!" Asked by the moderator if he agrees or not with the law, Klaus Iohannis explained: "I am fully against this law. I do not believe Romania needs such a law. PNL also voted against the first time PSD brought it up. I will be the president of Romania and I will not pass this law". Iohannis said that if Ponta won the elections, "the next day after the Law of amnesty and pardon is passed, all corrupt people will be back in society".

Debate Topics. Debates were based, at least theoretically, on national interest topics. General topics were basically the same. The approach was always in tune with the historic, social, political and economical context of the moment.

The first debate in 1990 brought general and vague topics about democracy and understanding of democratic systems. Two remarks were of capital importance. One belonged to Ion Iliescu and it is representative for the FSN policy of the time: "Those capable of reforming the system are those who belong to the system and have gained this experience because only they can analyze from the inside all the tools on a realistic basis." This was casting legitimacy on former communist leaders, as being the only ones capable of transforming society. Despite this statement, the most important moment of the debate was Ion Rațiu's statement: "I've been fighting for democracy for all my life. I left my country when I was very young. I opposed right wing totalitarians and then I opposed left wing totalitarians. The quintessence of democracy can be expressed in one phrase: I shall struggle to my last drop of blood for your right to disagree with me." Specific topics started getting clearer during the following campaigns.

Foreign policy was present in all debates. In 1996 the topic was about strengthening ties with European and Euro-Atlantic organisations and the embargo imposed on Serbia. Emil Constantinescu attacked Iliescu's credibility in the West, based on the treaty with USSR, Romania's dwindling position concerning the Moscow coup, on the weak reaction on Transnistria and his position in the Yugoslav question.

Iliescu answers, sustaining that representatives of certain parties placed themselves on anti-Romanian positions by lobbying against Iliescu. In 2009 the topic was about the Black Sea, Ukraine (Romania had just won the trial against Ukraine in The Hague). In 2014 the topic was capitalized by the voting abroad (Realitatea TV), discussing though about the need to prove ourselves as long term reliable partners, that we can increase defense expenses, as a starting point for security. Iohannis said that there is no need for a new axis Bucharest București - China. All that is needed is a serious president. Ponta said that Romania must play a more important role for the friends in the region: The Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and Serbia. Foreign policy did not fit into the debate on B1TV, even though it might be the most important topic of the political moment 2014.

Constitutional reform : In 1996 one of the hottest issues was Romanian Monarchy. Ion Iliescu insisted that Emil Constantinescu stated his position, always returning to monarchy, regardless of the topic. Equal in importance was the property guarantee. Ion Iliescu: Property cannot be guaranteed. To guarantee property means limiting citizens'

right on his own property. They have the right to sell property. We guarantee the right to property, which also gives the right to sell property.

In 2009 the topic focused on the Referendum for a unicameral parliament and the reduction of parliament members' number and also on the Romanian people's right to live in a just society.

President's intervention - with different variants like relationship between president and parliament, president and government, president and society, the topic was present in all debates. The interest in this topic was lower than entitled by its actual importance. The topic usually opened debates and Emil Constantinescu's reaction was memorable. He said he got the feeling of a school test paper.

National security was a frequent topic. In 1996 the topic was about national integrity being threatened by Hungarian minority and the Romanian Hungarian Treaty. Both candidates support the framework for ethnic minority affirmation and the firm support for national unity, rejecting all forms of ethnic autonomy and collective rights.

The debate in 2009 focuses on Romania's membership to NATO, the fifth article of the treaty guarantees that no member state can be left alone in case of an aggression. National security must be understood as a complex. It means not only military security, but people as well, sanitary security, food security or power supply security.

Justice and fighting corruption was a star topic of all presidential debates. In 1996 it was about the General Attorney's office blocking big corruption cases and having not a single corruption case solved. Both candidates launch allegations about the opponents' corrupt supporters and sponsors, and how they keep getting promoted. Examples are being asked on both sides but nobody is willing to reveal any name. This goes on until 2014. Traian Băsescu's appearance on the presidential debate scene marked the moment of bringing real names into this topic, names of convicted or allegedly corrupt politicians or businessmen.

The above mentioned topics were present in all presidential debates. The following topics, important as they may be, were not on the agenda of many debates, mainly due to producers' and moderators' lack of capacity to professionally deal with the time management issue. The only time all agreed topics were discussed was the 2009 debate. Some of the topics were partially discussed in 2014. These topics are: Economy, finance and economic crisis, social protection, education and young people, health and the Roșia Montană mining project.

VII. Conclusions

Final televised debates constitute a factor of influence, especially on the undecided zone.

Mr. Adrian Moraru, deputy manager of the Institute for Public Policies shows that there are three categories: the undecided, those who are not interested in elections and those

who will not vote. “50% of the Romanian population don’t watch TV, don’t read and don’t consume political news all day. Debates are meant to wake some, in the sense of showing them that there is more than Oana Zăvoranu or Steaua București and maybe some will decide to vote. It is a challenge for political consultants and strategists since they cannot „feel” the undecided, or at least not until too late, as it happened in 2004 . Adrian Năstase realized he was losing elections in the afternoon of the voting day. People answered Vasile Dâncu’s questions with *don’t know/not interested* , but un the eve or on the voting day all of a sudden, something happened, there was a spark.” He said that there is not only the silver bullet, but also the silver blunder. In 2009 there was the bullet in the debate and the blunder a few days earlier, Băsescu hitting a child at a rally. Moraru continues: „Debates not necessarily clarify options, but they spread a certain atmosphere throughout society much more profoundly than other traditional campaigning means.”

Former presidential adviser for Traian Băsescu, Mr.Valeriu Turcan thinks that: „in the event of a small difference what fundamentally counts is the energy of own voters which can determine a better or worse mobilisation depending on this level of energy. What really matters is the campaign structure, if it is capable of revving the engines to the max. Debates matters decisively and fundamentally. The undecided, who didn’t have much access to information during campaign, meets the candidates for the first time watching TV and for the first time he learns about the major topics of the campaign. That’s where Klaus Iohannis gained a slight advantage, being a fresh face.”

Beyond the considerations presented above, from the standpoint of television production, selected professional solutions have an overwhelming influence upon the quality of debates, in the sense of helping viewers make a voting decision. Beyond sociological aspects of presidential debates, the correct application of the science of television can influence viewer’s decision, consciently or not. Fundamental values of journalism should be represented in election shows in the purest and most responsible form, in the context in which television contributes effectively and sometimes decisively to the construction of nation’s future. Objectivity, responsibility, credibility, independence and good will, strengthened by the adequate, just, professional and responsible display of the visual message determined by creative usage of framings, camera angles, lights, video graphics, the rhythm of directing, swiftness in thinking and decision, ingenuity in designing and manufacturing sets, preparing movements on the set, are expected to produce an attractive TV show, yet credible and serious, in the interest of the citizen, in this case we are actually speaking of national interest.

If media theoreticians agree that television is a mixture of journalism and showbiz (Postman, 2006), then a quality show prepared by visual journalists (producers, moderators, directors, camera operators, even set designers, as long as all creatively contribute to the journalistic process of informing the public), responsible professionals, working on a professionally elaborated format that is attractive, easy to watch, follow and understand, it is sure to generate a mature opinion in the mind of an informed, conscient and responsible citizen.

This thesis proves that, in general, Romanian news TV stations, which have almost entirely accapartated the political debate space, are diverted from their primary

informative role not only by rushing for profit (sales through ratings) but also by assuming the toxic role of influence factor. More than that, the lack of interest shown for the professional visual approach means the abandonment of the power of the primary element of television, visuals being the essence and reason of the existence of television.